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Women's leadership crucial for growth

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AS the 59th Commission on the Status of Women gets underway in New York, it provides a good opportunity to take stock on commitments made to improve outcomes for Pacific women, particularly in the area of leadership.

In 2012, the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration saw Pacific leaders committing to improve women's leadership in the region. Since then, there have been some gains.

Women's political representation has had a modest increase to around 6 percent this year.

Dame Meg Taylor was appointed Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum and Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls appointed chair of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict.

Despite this, the Pacific continues to lag behind the rest of the world with some of the lowest participation rates of women in parliament. Supporting women's leadership in the Pacific is integral to reducing poverty, promoting economic growth and improving governance.

Inequality is holding back development.

Analysis by Dollar, Fisman, and Gatti shows that women leaders are less corrupt than men.

This research showed the



LILY Tua, a women leader in PNG, addressing a forum for women recently

greater the representation of women in parliament, the lower the level of corruption.

Likewise, research by ANU shows that increased women leadership improves economic growth - there is approximately a one percent increase in GDP for every 5 percentage point rise in women's leadership.

This international evidence is closely aligned with public perceptions in the Pacific.

A perceptions of women in leadership survey of over 1200 people undertaken in Fiji by the Fiji Women's Forum, with support from the International Women's Development Agency, shows that the respondents felt that women make excellent leaders due to being hardworking, honest and intelligent.

People felt increasing women's leadership was a good thing and that having diversity in representation leads

to improved decision making and a better functioning government.

Respondents indicated they perceive women political representatives as: three times less likely to accept bribes than men and three times better at managing budgets.

They also indicated the belief that women leaders are seven times more likely to resolve conflict than men.

Further research conducted in Solomon Islands by Roughan and Wini on voter behaviour towards women candidates before and after the 2014 national general elections also suggests that there is a very high level of support for the idea that women should be in parliament.

However, despite this high level of support, the small number of women in parliament in the Solomon Islands (only three women have ever been elected to Parliament), means that people do not vote for them in sufficient numbers.

The challenge is transforming people's desire for increased women in leadership to actual results.

Barriers to women's ability to get elected in the Pacific include a lack of campaign finance, strong gendered cultural perspectives meaning women are held to a different standard to men, and a lack of access to power brokers.

These are just some of the areas where concerted efforts to plug the gaps will help improve women's leadership.


Other areas for development could include: further leadership training; institutional strengthening; support for women who have been elected and establishing women's caucuses and support networks.

The Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women (FLOW) program, funded by the Netherlands Government, is supporting women in leadership in the Pacific.

The International Women's Development Agency is working with partners, including the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, FemLINK Pacific, Bougainville Women's Federation, Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation, Voice for Change, Women's Rights Action Movement and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum who have been achieving significant results in promoting women's leadership and decision making.

Since the program began FLOW has directly supported over 2,000 women and has reached more than 20,000 people. This includes the distribution of My Guide to Voting in Fiji, engaging 45 young women in community leadership positions; training 190 young women in leadership; and broadcasting over 5112 hours of community radio by female journalists.

*The authors of this article are Pacific Program Management at the International Women's Development Agency.



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